The Way Ahead: Lessons from Gnjilane, Kosovo

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Although well trained and focused on our mission in Kosovo, the task force leaders knew immediately upon passing through the Kachonic Valley that the mission would be difficult; that our soldiers would tire under the physical and mental stress; and that staying focused would be the challenge of our lives.

Our preparedness to face this challenge would be a combination of institutional knowledge, unit lessons learned, and countless days and hours spent at Home Station and the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC) in Germany. In essence, we and our predecessors would be writing the book on how to conduct support and stability operations in the peace enforcement environment.

The challenge would be to learn quickly the cultural, historical, economic, and political mores of a populace that existed in something less than a country. That task would be further compounded by the fact that this sub-country was occupied by two distinct groups of people who despised one another, and would, in most cases, prefer that the other group leave, "dead or alive." We took solace in the fact that our mission began in the winter and the lull in fighting would give us a chance to get our feet wet and prepare for the spring offensive, if there was to be one. Unfortunately for us, this assumption was based on the "Bosnia Model," and the hate and contempt in Kosovo went much deeper and would prove to be a year-round challenge.

My mission was to secure the town of Gnjilane to ensure freedom of movement for the ethnic populace. How such a simple mission could have demanded so much of my soldiers and me, only we will ever know. Maybe it was the fact that Gnjilane was populated with approximately 70,000 Albanians, 2,000 Serbians, and 500 Roma. All of these ethnic groups have one reason or another to hate each other, but even worse, they resolve to exterminate each other. So dedicating 150 soldiers to the protection of these 2,500 ethnic minorities may have been a bridge too far, but for the professionalism of the soldiers and officers of 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry.

This article is not meant to highlight the differences between the Serbian and Albanian populace of Kosovo, although, in some instances, it will be necessary. The article is meant to denote a few lessons learned, examine challenges that my unit faced, and take a bit of the discovery out of peace enforcement operations.

One of the most challenging duties of the command was to translate this mission and the responsibility shared by the interim local government and international organizations. Each soldier had to understand that the key to the municipality's success hinged on the abilities of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), United Nations Civil Police, local Civil Administration, and the United States Kosovo Force (USKFOR). These were the four pillars upon which peace and prosperity had to be built. Ineffective leadership or lack of purpose, the lack of cooperation and shortsighted private agendas of these organizations would precipitate mission failure and seriously reduce the chances of survival for a multiethnic region. Understanding the missions of these organizations became necessary because success in my

sector mandated the synchronization of their efforts. We asked a lot of our soldiers. It was not enough just to know the day's required security tasks, patrol routes, and checkpoint duties. The leaders had to have at least a working knowledge of how each pillar might complement or assist in any decision that was made.

I quickly learned that the tactics we applied at the CMTC, and other high-intensity lessons learned, were applicable and could be translated so that each soldier understood how to reference them in regard to peacekeeping. I found that doctrinal terminology, such as mutual support, dead space, dispersion, and redundancy, applied at all levels of the mission.

We applied five essential elements in Kosovo that I believe contributed to the success of the task force and the company team:

- **Identifying the security requirements.**
- **Using checkpoints and dismounted patrols.**
- **Interacting with local leaders.**
- **Using detailed graphical control measures.**
- **Decentralizing execution.**

When we first arrived in Gnjilane, the task seemed daunting. What was my mission as it pertained to the overall task force and brigade missions? How was my 150-man company going to secure this town of more than 70,000 people? Could we make a difference? I realized that I would have to focus on my own efforts and those of my soldiers as well. It was my job to define the company mission and ensure that everyone in the unit understood it. Any deviation from the mission would require swift and decisive action, or we would lose momentum in our chosen task. The company team mission—secure the town of Gnjilane to ensure the freedom of movement of the ethnic populace (Serb and Roma)—was born out of the necessity to tailor the mission so soldiers would understand what they had to do.

Our primary task before we could secure the ethnic minorities, which we found numbered a manageable 2,500, was to find out where each and every minority in the town lived. Company B was made up of four line platoons (three organic and an engineer platoon from Company A, 82d Engineers). Each platoon had a sector to comb daily. Their tasks were to pinpoint all ethnic minorities in sector, identify current and past problems, and document location on a map for future planning. This first step at gaining a working knowledge of our sector paid dividends for us throughout the entire mission. Not only did we locate the ethnic minorities in town, but we also developed a rapport with the populace by demonstrating that we were concerned with existing and past security problems.

After pinpointing the ethnic populace tasks—such as creating boundaries, identifying a main effort, and locating command posts—there became less guesswork and more educated assessment of the known requirements. Platoons learned such things as ethnic minority movement patterns, known troublemakers, and past shooting or grenade incidents. Each platoon then created target folders that contained the pictures of the homes and people along with demographic information such as school-aged children, problems, and skills. Documenting Serb and Roma homes, businesses and gathering places on a map and the demographically specific

target folders created a visual reference for all soldiers and gave the soldiers of each platoon the confidence they needed to man their sector.

Simply knowing the location and gathering places of the ethnic minorities was not enough. We had to find a way to maximize our newfound knowledge. Three key elements were characteristic of a platoon's sector: checkpoints, dismounted patrols, and a coordinated communications plan. Platoons, in turn, developed their battle rhythm from the number of centrally planned checkpoints and patrols. A carefully monitored battle rhythm was essential to success. Too many sector missions could create problems for the platoon, while too few could create sector issues.

Checkpoints were placed throughout sector in those areas that either had the higher ethnic population density or were more prone to violence. The soldiers at these checkpoints served as a static presence where the ethnic community could report problems and concerns, and they became very knowledgeable. They could easily recognize who belonged and who did not. Movement patterns and informal leaders of the community also became readily apparent as the people came and went. The populace soon recognized that violence and crime decreased wherever these checkpoints were, and it is no exaggeration when I say that every minority wanted one.

We applied certain doctrinal applications to the checkpoints: Each had to be mutually supporting; there was a minimum requirement of two soldiers at each; there had to be one man in and one man out; and each had to have communications. Platoons manned three to five checkpoints 250 to 300 meters apart. The number of checkpoints a platoon could man was based on the criteria listed above (minority population density and history of violent incidents). The soldier inside the checkpoint was in charge of communication, and the soldier outside was responsible for community interaction and presence (weapon at the ready). These requirements created the appearance of mass and, when placed in key locations and choke points, provided us with a tool to control an area that otherwise may have been too large for a company to cover.

While the checkpoints served as the stationary element, each platoon was also required to have a roving patrol at all times, which served as the platoon's maneuver element. These two elements worked together to respond to problems and sector issues throughout their areas of responsibility. The patrols concentrated on tying in the checkpoints, but also served as visible presence along "ethnic fault lines"—areas where ethnic minorities believed violent crime was most likely and, in a lot of cases, rightly so. They generally bordered ethnic neighborhoods. (Although no ethnic neighborhood was purely Serb or Roma, Albanians within these neighborhoods had a better track record for interaction with the minorities.)

Each platoon's roving patrol was tied into its checkpoints at all times. The patrols—four or five soldiers with basic load of ammunition and communication with both the checkpoints and the command post—were invaluable. They gathered information by reading the latest posters (a popular form of information sharing), talking to the populace, and gauging movement patterns. They were the maneuver element for the checkpoints, responding to situations that would take checkpoint personnel away from their posts. The patrols also served as an immediate reaction force for the company in those cases where one platoon could not handle a situation.

One of the key essential tasks that a platoon leader and platoon sergeant had to learn was the management of a battle rhythm. Once I identified the number of checkpoints that each platoon would man, based upon the above criteria, it was essential that the platoon determine how they would meet the minimum manning requirements. Because of the number of soldiers each platoon had, these minimum requirements often became the maximum requirements as well. Every now and then a platoon leader could determine that he needed an extra soldier on a shift to cover anomalies, but that was more the exception than the rule. Formulating a battle rhythm became the method by which a soldier or leader could determine sleep plan, maintenance, and physical training time. If a platoon had three checkpoints, it required six soldiers, a roving patrol with a minimum of four or five soldiers, and a command post with two or three soldiers quickly became a 14-man sector mission (shift). Each platoon could man two full sector missions and a consolidated after-curfew mission. Curfew was at 2200, and was generally adhered to, except for eight to ten violators per evening.

Although manning the checkpoints and conducting the roving patrols provided the company with a focused mission, security could not be attained without communication with those being secured (Serb and Roma) and the populace from whom they were being secured (Albanian). The task force developed a coordinated communications plan that included key leader meetings (mayors and community representatives), church meetings, and bi-partisan think-tank meetings. These meetings engaged the community and eventually evolved into town hall meetings that gave the people access to decisionmakers.

The task force commander and S-3 had a very aggressive meeting schedule that complemented the task force area of operations. For example, in Gnjilane, I held a weekly church meeting at the Serb Church, which included representatives from UNMIK, UNHCR, OSCE, the Serb Church Council, and Roma community leadership. In this meeting every Friday, I could reinforce task force themes on sector problems that may have been discussed in the Serb Mayor's meeting led by the S-3, or the Four Pillars meeting attended by the task force commander.

Along with the Serb Church meeting and Roma community meeting, I had a one-on-one meeting with the appointed Albanian mayor as well as a meeting with a local political party leader. In these meetings I reinforced security priorities, addressed task force and KFOR concerns, dispelled rumors, and provided the community with access to the decisions that were being made in their stead. I also learned where I needed to improve my security efforts and concentrate my patrols. Although many of the requests were 911 calls for personal security, genuine needs could also be determined from these meetings. The Serb Church served as the center of gravity for the remaining 2,000 or so Serbs who remained in town; therefore, they were able to present an actual weekly synopsis of problems for the community. I was able to gauge my company's success for the week from the number of complaints I received regarding the Serb community at these meetings.

In my meetings with the Albanians, my theme turned to inclusion. After listening to the stories of torment and abuse at the hands of the pre-war Serbs, we made a bit of headway with the Albanian leaders. After months of meeting with these organizations individually, the task force was finally successful in getting a key Albanian leader to attend a Serb town hall meeting. This

joint gathering made the months of meetings worth the effort. It left us with the hope that future meetings would be possible and that reconciliation was only a matter of time.

Although I believe the key to the company's success was mainly encompassed in the tasks of identifying the security requirements, conducting checkpoints and roving patrols, and interacting with community leaders—key subtasks that the company performed extremely well also contributed to our success. One of those tasks was the management of detailed graphical control measures. The task force that preceded us there passed to our task force a system of checkpoints and area management that we used and improved upon. It included a numbered checkpoint system that worked in conjunction with an area that had the name of a state in the United States whose geographic situation corresponded with general area in Gnjilane. This system was understood by all and helped the company master terrain that was foreign and, if not hostile, downright unfriendly at times.

The control measures assisted in reporting, response to sector emergencies, and soldier confidence. The newest private could get on the net and report a problem and vector the quick reaction force to the area that required attention. Everyone could converse about "the problem across the street from the mosque in the bar district vicinity I6 (checkpoint 6 in area Indiana)," and know exactly were the problem occurred. I was very proud of the mastery of terrain and situational awareness that these control measures brought the company and recommend a similar system for anyone involved in long-term peacekeeping security operations.

Decentralized execution is the method in which I took the most risk. Although I personally patrolled from 14 to 16 hours a day, including meetings—and my first sergeant conducted a "midnight run" for four to six hours per evening—platoons still conducted missions with very little supervision. Except for directed checkpoints and patrols, platoons executed missions in accordance with their battle rhythms. My dismounted patrol and the first sergeant's mounted patrol checked standards and reinforced the task force mission. Platoon leaders and platoon sergeants were often patrol leaders on different sector missions. The success of the company was in the hands of junior NCOs on checkpoints, soldiers on dismounted patrols, and section leaders at command posts.

The soldiers' interaction with the community was also an important stabilizing factor with the Serbs and Roma who did remain in town. The interaction addressed security—the most essential concern of these people. It also helped KFOR identify the "ethnic fault lines" by increasing sector knowledge through casual and directed conversations and a simple awareness of where the community lived. Many minorities believed that time would heal the wounds between the Albanian and minority populace—KFOR is the mechanism that the populace used to gain this much-needed time. Minorities also remained in the community because of KFOR's willingness to man 24-hour and periodic checkpoints. These checkpoints were the only dependable KFOR operations in sector that were dedicated to increasing the freedom of movement of the Serb and Roma population. Most of the minority population remained in those places where KFOR manned a checkpoint. KFOR's willingness to man these static positions helped the community gain the time needed to heal the festering wounds of hatred and contempt.

Much more than a dedicated security force is needed to solve the problems in Gnjilane and, on a larger scale, Kosovo. As I have stated, many organizations and groups are trying in their own ways to help. Synchronizing the efforts of the groups to increase the freedom of movement, and the inclusion of ethnic minorities must remain a priority of the collective peacekeeping mission. Although at some cost, a multi-ethnic environment may be salvaged in Kosovo. Key ingredients to this equation include continued presence along the "ethnic fault lines" to increase freedom of movement, minority participation in local and regional government, and the synchronization of effort between UNMIK, the Civil Police, the Civil Administration, and KFOR.

Both success and failure are summarized in the formula for Gnjilane's short-term and long-term future. Although failure is easily attainable, success is an elusive concept that can be achieved only through the slow erosion of hate and violence. Since success cannot be quantified, participants in the operation will have to evaluate their labors within the collective peace structure over time.

To the soldiers I found at checkpoints at 0200 with weapons at the ready (one man in and one man out in the rain), to the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants chasing down phantom leads to meet the Commander's Intent, to the section leader who conducted mounted patrol at night in night-vision devices for eight hours, and to my first sergeant who never let me or the company fail: "Yours was the hard task."